

# **Montana VR Council Meeting Minutes January 13-14, 2005**

# Vocational Rehabilitation Council

## January 13-14, 2005

**Members Present:** Jim Daily, Dick Trerise, Ruth Straley, Myrle Tompkins, Barbara Varnum, Ian Elliot, Jacob Wagner, Don Jones, Claudette Vance, Wayne Nankivel

**Members Absent:** Shaunda Albert, Mike Hermanson, Denise Corrao, Dennis Moore, Haley Beaudry, Chris Clasby, David Boyd, Carol Lambert, Ron Mills

**Staff and Guests present:** Peggy Williams, Joe Mathews, Bob Jahner

### Thursday, January 13

Jim called the meeting to order at 1:00 in the Disability Determination Services conference room in Helena. The November minutes were approved.

### Announcements

Dick stated that the federal Special Education Act, IDEA, passed recently, and there are significant changes in procedures and processes. Some of these changes are related to identifying students for special education, determining learning disability, autism spectrum disorders, and transition planning. Special education guidebooks are being re-written, and there are funding issues.

### State and federal update

Joe discussed many state and federal developments.

In the area of reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, including the Rehabilitation Act, Joe believes that there will be more emphasis on transitions. There will be more requirements, but no more money to carry them out. Congress is still talking about block grants to states, no longer making the commissioner of the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration a presidential appointee but rather a department head (thus diminishing his importance), and whether VR must pay for the Workforce program.

On the state level, Joe mentioned he has been over at the Legislature a lot—the subcommittee is now considering the VR budget. Issues for VR include moving extended employment funding and independent living funding back to the general fund (last session, due to a shortage of general fund, these programs were funded by the Prevention and Stabilization Account (PSA)—but these funds are not meant to be a long term funding source). Governor Schweitzer did include these programs in the general fund. Fully matching the federal grant is always an issue, and it appears that VR is just barely fully matched (if everything like pay raises go through). Another VR issue is

tuition increases for consumers who are studying at a post-secondary institution. Montana Association of Rehabilitation would like the Legislature to expand the extended employment program to serve more consumers, and they testified to the subcommittee on this (it was not included in the Governor's budget). Montana Association of the Blind would like a technologist to be hired—that is, a person who is an expert on adaptive equipment for the blind. This also is not included in the Governor's budget, but Montana Association of the Blind did testify for it at the Legislature.

VR is experiencing a number of retirements—Larry Harlan, regional administrator in Great Falls; Vona Sundberg, counselor supervisor in Kalispell; and Denise Wolf, independent living specialist in central office.

With the new governor, come new appointments. The new director of the Department of Public Health and Human Services is Dr. Robert Wynia, a physician from Great Falls. Also Governor Schweitzer appointed Lena Belcourt to a newly created position—Disability Advocate—in the Governor's Office.

#### Brain Injury update

Ian came to the meeting late, because he played his bagpipes for the House of Representatives. Carol Lambert introduced him, and said he was playing in honor of Vocational Rehabilitation. Ian was well received, and members of the House all stood when he played.

Ian updated the Council on the Brain Injury grant. This grant has three prongs—Senior and Long Term Care Division, Brain Injury Association, and Montana Center on Disabilities. Ian has been hired by Montana Center on Disabilities. The mediation between Senior and Long Term Care Division was successful. The Brain Injury Association now has a speakers bureau. March is national Brain Injury Awareness Month. April 26-27 will be the Native American Brain Injury conference in Billings, and Ian invited everyone to attend.

#### Policy and other updates

Bob Jahner talked about some of the due process cases that have arisen over the past year. There were a couple human rights cases, and the ruling was that the department did not discriminate. There have been 10 appeals, and one fair hearing. Some of the cases involve safety issues (volatile consumers) and Bob is grateful for the help a couple years ago from the VR Council on the Safety Policy. Bob noted that VR is serving a lot more mental disabilities than in the past, which is consistent with other states. Bob is also working on an automation project that will make some of the counselor work more efficient. Currently VR has an automated system for authorizing and paying bills and for client information and statistics. The new system will computerize some of the counselor's daily work such as the Individualized Plan for Employment.

### Program updates

Peggy addressed a variety of programs:

**Ticket to Work**—This program, under the Social Security Administration, provides a “ticket” to people who are disabled and receive Social Security disability benefits. The consumer can take this ticket to an employment network to get services to go back to work. The employment network is paid for its services only after the consumer goes to work at “substantial gainful activity”. So far, slightly over 200 tickets have been “redeemed” in Montana—almost all were given to VR. This number of tickets is not the number of people who have gone to work, but the number of people who have given an employment network their ticket. The program is not as successful as Social Security had hoped. Many employment networks are disillusioned because they can provide a lot of services and then if the consumer does not earn enough money, the employment network is not paid.

**Operational plan**—Peggy went over the recommendations from last year’s “Rainbow” (strategic plan) meeting. Many of the items have been addressed. No money was available to start new projects, so everything must be accomplished with existing resources.

**Legislative bills**—Peggy provided a list of bills that affect people with disabilities. Anyone who would like regular updates on this list can contact Peggy.

**Consumer Satisfaction Survey**—Alan Davis recently completed analyzing the Consumer Satisfaction Survey. Alan is from Montana State University in Billings, and he designed the survey for the VR Council a number of years ago. He wanted to come to the meeting to present the results in person, but was not able to make it this time. Overall the satisfaction results are very good.

**Governor’s Report**—The Governor’s report was sent Governor Martz in December. Copies will be made for each Legislator, and a mailing will be sent to “Friend of Rehab”.

### Election of officers

Jim Daily was elected chair of the Council, and Ian Elliot was elected vice-chair.

### Next meeting dates

Ian invited the Council to meet in Billings in April in conjunction with the Native American Brain Injury Conference. Peggy will look into this and will poll the Council on whether to attend this out-of-Helena meeting or have the September meeting on a reservation. The budget will only support one out-of-Helena meeting this year.

**Friday, January 14**

On Friday the Council met at the Legislature to hear and participate in the public testimony for the Vocational Rehabilitation program. Jim, Ian, and Myrle provided testimony for the program.

Because of the cold and the last minute schedule changes, only the Native American Committee meeting was held.

**Attachment A**  
**Native America Committee**  
**January 2005**

Dick discussed a grant that the Office of Public Instruction received relating to Native Americans. They have subcontracted with Parents Let's Unite for Kids (PLUK) to do outreach on reservations. PLUK will get parents familiar with training opportunities, such as video conferences. They will hook up the parents with a PLUK representative and an OPI representative. They could also involve a VR counselor to meet with the Native American parents. Dick suggested that we follow up with Dennis Moore for more information.